DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 336 CS 510 885

AUTHOR Bartlett, J. L.
TITLE "From the Eyes of a Student": Performing Subjectivity in the Composition Classroom.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Discourse; Higher Education; *Revision (Written Composition); *Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Contact Zones; Intertextuality; Subjectivity

ABSTRACT

Being "unfailingly conscious" of one's subject position (and performing it in a formal writing assignment) are the tenets of "initiation pedagogy," the intertextual analysis behind D. Bartholomae and A. Petrosky's "Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts," and their subsequent composition textbook "Ways of Reading," which the author of this paper was teaching for the first time when Nick and Billy dropped by--Nick was a student in the class and Billy was a character invented by Nick for one of his papers. Nick was asked to write a critical analysis of Paulo Freire's and Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone pedagogies, and he turned it into a narrative of Billy's first day of high school. This paper deals with Nick's rewrite of his paper and his machinations in the restructuring/rewriting of that paper. It explains that, when the author read Nick's second draft, with its attempt to objectify subjective experience in ways that her other students were in the process of mastering, she decided to literalize these performances, of genre, of self, and see if she could bring all of her students into a literal conversation with their texts, a move that would publicly reveal their own "reads"; she assigned dramatic dialogues, an interaction with the authors under consideration, hoping that the absurdity of the assignment would demystify some of the "cache" that the works possessed. According to the paper, teaching students a feel for the game requires first that capital is configured as a vision of choices, a combined recognition of the options in view as well as the reasons for them, the hunch about which one to choose, and the instinct behind it. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 464 336

"From the Eyes of the Student": Performing Subjectivity in the Composition Classroom

J. L. Bartlett

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. L. Bartlett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

CS 510 885

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

J. L. Bartlett

Session N.9, *Theories of Performance*

23.3.02

12:30-1:45

"From the eyes of a student":

Performing Subjectivity in the Composition Classroom

Billy was never a student in my class. Nick and I disagree on this. Nick was a student in my class, who invented a character named Billy for one of his papers. Billy goes to a phantom high school in New Jersey, he wears a leather jacket and a "school sucks attitude," and he prefers Paulo Freire's "problem posing education" to banking education, which, he says, "makes [him] sick." I asked Nick to write a critical analysis of Freire's and Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone pedagogies, and he turned in a narrative of Billy's first day of high school, complete with dialogue, description, and denouement. When I asked Nick to rewrite his paper, he started sharing Billy's sartorial and pedagogical taste, told me education was "flat-out unfair," and argued that the experience of his hero contributes to a broader cultural conversation about educational oppression. At the bottom of my syllabus, after a naïvely treated excerpt from Kenneth Burke's *Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, wherein I imagine my classroom as a continuous conversation integrating voices both present and absent, I ask my students, in a bold Times New Roman font, to be "unfailingly conscious of their own subject positions." When I think of Billy, Nick, and Kenneth Burke in that order, I can see that I'm being punished for my metaphor.

Being "unfailingly conscious" of one's subject position (and performing it in a formal writing assignment) are the tenets of "initiation pedagogy," the intertextual analysis behind Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, and their subsequent composition textbook *Ways of Reading*, which I was teaching for the first time when Nick and Billy dropped by. If we assume, as

Bartholomae and Petrosky argue, that "A classroom performance represents a moment in which, by speaking or writing, a student must enter a closed community, with its secrets, codes and rituals" (*Facts* 8), and if we assume that a student "has to invent himself as a reader and he has to invent an act of reading by assembling a language to make a reader and a reading possible, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of an institution" (*Facts* 8), then we can argue that Nick's performance as Billy the Student is a rendering of subjection as subjectivity, an authorized helplessness that whispers truth to power. Given such authorization, academic discourse seems at once immaterial and suspect, an organization of linguistic codes that reinscribes the traditional power dynamics that Nick wants to refute, a "reading against the grain" that *Ways of Reading* seems to endorse. But, not understanding that narrative might carry its own conflicted burden, he invents Billy the surrogate, who crosses "Mrs. Pratt" and "Mr. Freire," as they parrot quotations from their essays in classrooms. Ironically, this ventriloquism amounts to banking education: Billy's reactions are wholly submissive and predictable in that he never refutes or smites either educator, and so both he and Nick fail to demonstrate any engagement with the texts or issues at stake; their only authority comes from the story's omniscient narration, a tone as varied as its confidence with the material, "Billy does think that education as a whole is in too much control of the teacher," a vacillation which bankrupts what little power an oppressed voice might have by bracketing it within the concerns of a quasi-parental exegesis.

When I asked Nick to rewrite the essay as a "critical analysis," I blamed the university explicitly; I told him that the "department" could not accept such work, and that I, as its representative, was bound to refuse it. I fronted the institutional matrix because I wanted to, in Bartholomae's terms, "make the classroom available for critical inquiry…to make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge" ("Writing" 66). Since this was the second paper Nick had written for me, and the first had corresponded to the letter, if not the spirit, of conventional academic discourse, we considered together the authority sanctioned to analyze and contextualize text over and against the authority of a

first-person narrative that passively engaged text, and discussed ways of using personal experience for literary flavor rather than an evidential foundation. In the end, I asked for a rewrite. But it's tough to be altogether convincing, since Nick has Derrida on his side: the "Law of Genre," argues that my feeble stylistic codification is the "*a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason," making narrative as much an inevitable tendency as a form. But there's another way of looking at the issue that integrates Nick's experiential perspective and that of an objectified sequence of power relations, threatening to trounce him. This paper will be a way of getting at that synthesis, and I want to use Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* to get there.

Bourdieu begins his *Outline*, a broad statement of his socio-philosophical methodology, with an analysis of gift exchange, as sketched by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. Mauss's rendering of gift exchange is phenomenological, it "sets out to make explicit the truth of [his] primary experience of the social world" (4), a familiarity with the event that mirrors Nick's rendition of Billy's school day. Lévi-Strauss, in his denunciation of such amateur sociology, "makes a complete break with native experience and the native theory of that experience, positing that it is the exchange of the constructed object which 'constitutes the primary phenomenon'" (4). In other words, we have a classic distinction here between personal narrative and objective critique, an analysis of the instance of writing as an attempt to render prewritten, socially constructed behaviors as powerfully idiosyncratic. Bourdieu argues that neither of these perspectives tells the whole story, that any exchanged gift must correspond to certain regulations that are both objectively rendered and subject to choice. A "counter-gift must be deferred and different, because the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a refusal" (5). In this way gift exchange is opposed to both swapping and lending, and the choice of an appropriate counter-gift, given within an appropriate time-lapse, is crucial for the exchange's success. So, if we substitute papers and A grades for the corresponding gifts, we can see the amount of subjective calculation that goes into the response to an objective stimulus. In some high school classes, a narrative is an adequate, even laudatory, reaction to an assignment, and an A grade performs the corresponding exchange. In other

cultures, or what Bourdieu would call other fields, the choice to turn in a narrative is not appropriate, and is exchanged for a failing grade. The choice a student makes is dependent upon the options a student sees; teaching Nick to make the right choices depends on recognizing what he sees as his options, which is a kind of vision that his history, or habitus, has created. Language is a form of wealth, a cultural capital that governs an individual's position or status, in a given field. The acquisition and mastery of a particular discourse demonstrates a kind of strategy, a "feel for the game" that determines who "wins" any given contest. In other words, resisting the Derridean tendency toward generic pandemonium in the "right way" will provide Nick with a certain status, an A grade and the cultural perks that it represents.

His second draft started out well enough:

> Through the student's eye, education is a joke. Today, kids in school are bored, not motivated, and uninterested in learning what is taught....It is noticed that students are unhappy in schools, and request are made to change the situation. Mary Louise Pratt, and Pablo [sic] Freire ar two people who, due to personal experience or simply noticing the need for reform, make suggestions on how to fix things. (1)

"The student" has taken the place of "Billy," and Nick has restructured his opening to focus on the topic at hand, the alternative pedagogies of Pratt and Freire. Granted, the topic is far too unfocused to pull Nick out of the C-range, but his approach to the paper gestures toward the kinds of prose the university accepts as its own, even returning to passive voice in the "It is noticed" to give the voice an impartial, scientific authority. But then, Nick returns to his classic position of power—the weak student whose weakness authorizes him to speak for the disenfranchised—and continues his essay with the kind of testimonial that illustrates, once more, that he's unable to correctly conceptualize the expectations of his audience. He continues,

> The main problem with education is that it is terribly one-sided. I, being a student, can contest to this. Speaking form personal experience, education is flat out unfair. Throughout my life I have been forced to do what teachers asked....In this very class, expository writing, I was given an assignment to write an essay comparing the ideas of Pablo Freire and Mary Louise Pratt. Asked by the teacher not to generalize the topic but use some specific details to reach our point, I decided to show the effect of the writers' ideas on the most important player, the student....I

> followed the guidelines, used quotations of the writers, and told a story so that the reader can see what actually happens instead of read about what would happen....I was punished. (1-2)

Nick's conceptualization of his first paper in this rewrite is that he completed the requested assignment and *more*. He never stops assuming that his personal experience is his source of power, and that narrative is the best way to illustrate that power, so he merely transfigures his position as a *storyteller* in the narrative mode into an *example* in the description, analysis, argument mode. He's still telling a story, of course, but by resituating himself as an example, turns the paper into a different rhetoric, which he assumes will "fix" everything.

This solipsism is an inherent consequence of the university turn to a communications emphasis in the latter half of the twentieth century, a democratized, open-admissions literacy that synthesized grammatical dictates and literary emphasis through the conventions of genre. Representative texts such as Brooks and Warren's *Modern Rhetoric* argue that writing "against a background of principle" necessitates a progress of assignments in narration, description, exposition, and argument, moving the writer-citizen from a position subject to the narrated event to a mastery of event through language. But this discursive movement from private to public, through its foundation in personal narrative, isolates the writer from sociocultural contexts, those influences of class, gender, and race that comprise the "democratized" subject.

This model is still very much alive in Nick's school system, as the *New Jersey Language Arts Literacy Curriculum Framework* for 1998, Nick's senior year of high school, makes plain. For each of the five curriculum standards, suggested (indeed, state-sponsored) assignments locate the source of authoritative knowledge and rhetorical power in the student's own experience or invention. For example, standard 3.1, "All students will speak for a variety of real purposes and audiences," is translated as an assignment to create an imaginary couple, born in 1900 and 1908 respectively, and write about world events through their narratives. Even standard 3.4, "All students will read a variety of materials and texts with comprehension and critical analysis," directs students inward; teaching literary

theory, such as "formalist, biographical, historical, sociological, gender, and reader response" approaches is best done, according to the manual, through journal writing, a record of student responses to texts that the students themselves are to label and use in their papers, lists of class comments with citations like "Joe" or "Jane" rather than the accepted discourse, which, as a strategy, "doesn't put undue emphasis on terminology" (155). Nick is unable to invent the university, to analyze text in a critical discourse, because this training has prevented him from reading contextually and recognizing the kinds of expectations the course has established.

At this point, I want to stress the term "recognition," because I think it gets at the heart of everything educators are grappling with, in terms of the production, execution, and valuation of rhetorical processes. In Bartholomae's legendary 1991 "conversation" with Peter Elbow, the construction and/or depiction of writerly "space" was at issue—is the space coopted from without by sociocultural, political, juridical power, or can it ever be "free" in a romantic sense, from judgment or coercion. These positions can be easily reconciled, and not in the ways traditionally mentioned—Elbow says that "nothing is better than freewriting at showing us how we are constructed and situated" (89). Wendy Bishop argues that an open space is never free from the past, that "most meadows I've hiked show scars of settlement" (97)—these positions can be reconciled in that they depend, quite literally, on the writer's recognition of them, not just as free space with traces of history, but as space itself. It takes a certain skill, a certain cultural capital, to see scars of settlement in a meadow or traces of cultural constructs in a freewriting mess; many students, many of my students, would see something else, wouldn't even see a "meadow," or something called "freewriting." When I asked my students for a piece of academic discourse, each student had a set of choices to make; Nick was the only one to choose to write a narrative. I'm not suggesting that writing a narrative didn't *occur* to anyone else, but for Nick it seemed the most profitable (and I intend the term) performance. His strategy for negotiating the English 101 field successfully involved writing me a story and performing the subjectivity of a subjugated writer. Bourdieu would argue that Nick's embodied history, his habitus, made up of all previous exposure to

personal, narrative, or academic rhetoric, all grades, teacher comments, good and bad, has ill prepared him to navigate this field successfully, to offer an appropriate gift for exchange.

Rhetorical models that de-emphasize student subjectivity, like the intertextual critiques in *Ways of Reading*, privilege "strong readers" who "remake what they have read to serve their own ends, putting things together, figuring out how ideas and examples relate" (12). A student who's been conversely trained in narrative and personal reflection as the journey and destination of the language arts, will be thrown into either a hyperpersonal, "phenomenological" response to a *Ways of Reading* text, or will slink out of the text altogether, into the cold gaze of an "objectified" compare/contrast essay. Those who can bridge the divide and perform a critical, intertextual reading have learned a "feel for the game" that comes from embodied experience, a certain disposition, and an eye toward the accumulation of cultural capital. If I'm making that sound mysterious and intangible, good. Because many instructors think that getting a student to make the elusive third choice, involves an acknowledgement of their subject position, gendered, classed, sexed, racialized, stratified, and/or a tweaking of their writing, main topics, grammar, examples, support, connections. But these are subsets of strategy, they are skills and biases, but not the conditions which make knowledge possible. Bourdieu argues that educational institutions are structured to favor those students with the cultural capital it claims to produce, thereby taking the habitus of the dominant group as natural and proper while treating all students as though they had access to it. When a student's habitus is incompatible, the breach that is produced (and all breaches bear the sign of their habitus and can be read for access to it) opens up an investigatory space for the teacher and student; so that the way to recognize the conditions which make knowledge, biases, choices and skills possible for a student is to make knowledge public, unexpected, and dialogical.

Unlike other instructors at Rutgers, who asked students to "turn their attention to their own roles" in "thought papers" or "journal writing assignments," self-reflexive work that, according to Joshua Fausty, "encourages students to recognize their own preliminary insights" (493), I take seriously the notion that "recognizing" one's insights requires a cultural capital that many students don't have, and certainly

won't find in isolation. When I read Nick's second draft, in its attempt to objectify subjective experience in ways that my other students were in the process of mastering, I decided to literalize these performances, of genre, of self, and see if I could bring all of my students into a literal conversation with their texts, a move that would publicly reveal their own "reads." I assigned dramatic dialogues, an interaction with the authors under consideration (Pratt, Freire, and now Virginia Woolf), hoping that the sheer absurdity of the assignment would demystify some of the cache that the works possessed. I asked my students not to quote the authors directly, and to pick the wackiest or most nonlinear circumstance imaginable. Without prompt, most of my students wrote themselves into the dialogues as subordinate characters (a move perhaps in tandem with their secondary educations): Michele went with the authors to McDonald's, where Freire thought the ordering procedure too dictatorial, Pratt thought it grappling, and Woolf thought it androgynous (Doherty 2). We performed some of these in class, and after the scenes devolved into chaos, characters acting off-script, or putting on potentially offensive accents, postures, bits of costuming, or even ending the scene abruptly with violence or innuendo, I asked the class to think about the essence of each character, and to see how those essences changed for each dialogue. If the code word for Woolf in the McDonald's scene was "androgynous," and in another her code word was "Shakespeare's sister," then the student-writer's recognition of those aspects became discernible, and the keys to their training lay in wait. We weighed the strategies of each representation, what it was and wasn't saying about the student's knowledge of the text, how it performed their reading, and what processes we could see each reader going through, choosing one valence over another. If their papers and comments to me are to be believed, many students found this exercise helpful, for it not only told them there were different ways of seeing the choices that presented themselves to different readers, but it *showed* them the differences as well, the way one reading quite literally "looks," a turn I hoped Nick would appreciate. Some other ways of enacting this same retracing of the habitus would be to ask students to summarize in their own words the essay's argument, switch papers with another person, and have them perform a reading of their reading, that illustrates some of the choices they see and the

decisions they ultimately make. Another would be to turn the lens on the writers of the textbook, syllabus, or assignments they receive, looking at the choices and biases other writers, writers in positions of power, may have, and switch those readings with a classmate, to find the student's vision or habitus once more.

In other words, Nick's recognition of the possibilities of narrative as a demonstration of mastery in the field is Michele's recognition of "androgyny" as the foundational concept of Woolf's essay, and the success of their choices, the success of their strategies for choosing, is the thing that needs to be broached or delineated when we challenge writers to perform a discourse inside an academy of which they are not a part. Encouraging them to "be unfailingly conscious of their own subject positions" without understanding that recognizing the elements of said subjectivity is a cultural capital that is not a part of every student's habitus, is virtually useless; and conversely, getting them to write the way we do without any consideration of their positions within the field is equally so. The Burkean conversation metaphor, which so insidiously structured my approach to *Ways of Reading* presupposes an understanding of metaphor, an understanding of conversation, and an understanding of dialogue, that many of our students do not share. Teaching students a feel for the game, requires first that capital is configured as a vision of choices, a combined recognition of the options in view as well as the reasons for them, the hunch about which one to choose, and the instinct behind it. Reading for the habitus is a portable strategy, that resituates the comprehensive demands of academic discourse into a negotiated space between the writer, embodied history, and the present requirements of any given gift exchange. Enabling students to, in Bartholomae's words "see what they have said" (*Facts* 7) is not enough; they must also ask why they have seen, and why they have said. It's a theory of theory and a theory of practice that requires something more, and something new, of us and our students.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, D. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write*. Ed. M. Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985. 134-165.

--. "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow." *CCC* 46.1 (1995): 62-71.

-- and Anthony Petrosky, eds. *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. Montclair: Boynton Cook, 1986.

--. *Ways of Reading*. New York: Bedford St. Martins, 1999. 5th edition.

Bishop, Wendy. "If Winston Weathers Would Just Write to Me on E-Mail." *CCC* 46.1 (1995): 97-103.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. New York: Cambridge, 1977.

Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. *Modern Rhetoric*. New York: HBJ, 1979.

Colletto, N. "Let's Think of the Student." Unpublished essay, 1999.

--. "Paper 2." Unpublished essay, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre." *On Narrative*. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: U Chicago, 1981.

Doherty, M. "Pratt, Freire, and Woolf Dialogue." Unpublished dialogue, 1999.

Elbow, Peter. "Interchanges." *CCC* 46.1 (1995): 87-92.

Fausty, Joshua. "Framing Composition: A Graduate Instructor's Perspective." *Pedagogy* 1.3 (2001): 489-503.

New Jersey Department of Education. *New Jersey Language Arts Literacy Curriculum Framework*. Newark: 1998.